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The Witness

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WASHINGTON.

A glass of ice water on the table in front of Francis Gary Powers frosted and ran clear in rivulets. It remained almost untouched. He had little need for it. He was the coolest man in the room.

Mr. Powers, at 32, had been questioned by experts: the Central Intelligence Agency, when it hired him to fly the U-2 plane high over Russia; the Soviet espionage system, when it caught him; the Moscow court which tried him; the CIA again when it got him back in exchange for Soviet master-spy Rudolf Abel.

Yesterday, he was before a public session of the Senate Armed Services Committee and it had become for him what the Air Force calls S. O. P.—standard operating procedure.

Impeccably dressed in an oxford-gray, lightweight, three-button suit, with a compatible dark-gray tie, he could have been a young account executive over from Madison Avenue, selling a new television show to a sponsor that was already sold.

He had a good show and he knew it. His hands were steady and his voice was calm. He kept his arms folded during most of his hour and a half of testimony, breaking the pose now and then for a choppy left-hand gesture. His voice was softly Southern, a little high-pitched, and shy but confident.

Mr. Powers is a handsome man—closely cropped black hair, olive complexion, hazel eyes, even features, a flashing, white-toothed smile. He is about medium height (5-feet-8) and well built (160 pounds). He could have passed for an astronaut.

The women who predominated in the overflow audience liked that. They commented on it, rather wonderingly, as if to say, "How can he look so thoroughly American and yet have gotten us into all that trouble?"

But before the interrogation was over, there was a general feeling that it had been no trouble at all. Certainly, if there had been any, it was obvious that nobody was blaming this man. One by one, the committee members began to commend Mr. Powers for his behavior in the difficult spot he found himself in on May Day 1960. He took their accolades as unflinchingly as their questions.

Mr. Powers was not alone. Lawrence Houston, general counsel for the CIA, sat at his left in the Senate caucus room. The marbled room is not unlike Moscow's Hall of Columns where Mr. Powers was tried as a spy. A couple of burly CIA agents sat behind them. Together, they looked like a championship backfield, in mufti, with Mr. Powers as the star breakaway halfback and the others as his blockers.

Indeed, they performed that way. Entering and leaving the jammed hearing room, the bigger CIA men formed around him and plowed through the crowd. There were various estimates as to attendance. Some said it was the biggest since Teamsters boss Jimmy Hoffa was on the griddle there; others that only Wendell L. Willkie had topped it during his lend-lease testimony after World War II.

In any event, the people came early. Forty-five minutes before Mr. Powers and his flying wedge arrived at 1:52 p. m., all 200 spectator seats were filled and another 200 lined the walls and aisles. Space was provided at eight tables for 143 newsmen, but almost another 100 were standing. The absence of television cameras—banned by the chairman, Sen. Richard B. Russell, D., Ga.—made it possible to crowd more newsmen and spectators into the room.

It was pin-drop quiet as Mr. Powers explained in his gentle monotone how he fought to stay alive the day that "something" shot him down over Russia. He used a afoot-long model of the U-2 to demonstrate his plight. He stood and, using the table before him as the imaginary side of his stricken plane, showed by leaning over and twisting how he struggled to tear loose from the [illegible] which kept him from falling free of the cockpit.

He had a sense of the dramatic. [illegible] struggle [illegible] classic understatement [illegible] were an account of [illegible] hunting [illegible] in Pound, Va.—he "they [illegible]" to speak up and [illegible]

"One thing that I always remembered while I was there, and that is that I'm an American," he said, and the spectators clapped furiously.

He could get a laugh, too, with his flair for understatement. Sen. Russell wanted to know if, by being reluctant to answer his Soviet interrogators (as he said he was), perhaps he had violated his orders to cooperate with his captors.

[illegible]

"You shouldn't go overboard in this co-operation, I think," [illegible] and the spectators laughed.

They laughed again when he said matter-of-factly that, somehow, he had lost his appetite after his capture. They were laughing more when he explained that what he meant, when he said at his trial that he was sorry, was different from what he wanted the court to believe he meant.

"My main sorrow," he said, "was that my mission had failed and that this caused a lot of embarrassment to the states."

After the hearing, Mr. Powers was waylaid by newsmen as he sought to thread his way out of the building. He had little to say, except that he expects to continue working for the CIA "for a while," and after that his plans are not definite. [illegible] to the money due him [illegible] $50,000, he expect[illegible] "slowly, to m[illegible] as I ca[illegible]"